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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how the element of concreteness can be injected into the teaching of composition. Some basic guidelines are presented and then illustrated with descriptions of sample teaching materials and devices in lesson sequences. The guidelines indicate: that the writing experience should be carefully and naturally integrated into the total language teaching cycle; that writing experiences need not be directly drawn from reading stories, but rather ideas could be suggested from reading experiences; that the teacher must analyze carefully the writing task to assure a developmental approach with attention to clearly defined skills and sub-skills; that constant experiential, visual, and auditory reinforcement must be provided to keep the concrete experience or idea foremost in the student's consciousness; that models should be provided in the developmental writing process; and that the development of concepts for a major composition must be slow and deliberate. Four illustrative lessons are provided for a developmental writing sequence, indicating objectives, materials, procedures, summary, follow-up activity, and home assignment. (WR)

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FROM THE CONCRETE TO THE ABSTRACT: MAKING WRITING CONCEPTS REAL FOR THE MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT
(A Demonstration of Teaching Strategies)

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If all of the recent professional publications devoted to the teaching of composition were laid end to end, they probably would extend from the United States Office of Education to Nebraska and Oregon and back again. The principles for composition teaching set forth in those publications need not be restated here. We have heard them all and, quite likely, endorse them fully. Yet the disturbing fact remains that English teachers in the middle school and at other levels still have difficulty getting from their students anything that vaguely resembles clear written communication. And students still view English, and particularly English composition, as something from another world, completely unrealistic and nothing short of a colossal bore!

If any optimists among us are tempted to label this indictment as false or as an over-generalization, I invite them to share a day in the life of their local English supervisor or to talk to teachers and to students. Better still, listen to the rap sessions in the nearest teachers' room. In my duties back home as an English supervisor, I have been able to take full advantage of all of the aforementioned opportunities and, in addition, to observe teaching and to read student papers that are the result of much frustration and agony and that obviously reflect that frustration and agony in their quality. Further, I have the advantage of being the mother of a middle schooler whose composition grades generally fall into the low "B" or "C" range. In this regard his facility with English usage stands him in good stead, for the content of his writing is not likely to generate enthusiasm even in the worst English teacher. When asked if he enjoyed writing the compositions assigned by his enlightened (by my standards) teachers, he wasted no words: "No! They're dumb, and they take too much of my time and I don't get anything out of them. I just write them to be writing them-- because the teachers say so." The lure of football, basketball, and baseball can easily explain the complaint about time. However, even his concession that most of the topics assigned were "kind of interesting" did little to soften the sting of the indictment that he "didn't get anything out of them". His comments are fairly representative of the feelings I have heard expressed by other youngsters of differing backgrounds and abilities.

Where does the problem lie? Few enlightened teachers disagree with the new theories of composition teaching contained in our lists of "Do's" and "Don't's"; yet few of these teachers are able to bridge the gap between theory and practice. A possible answer is that much of the blame can be placed squarely upon the shoulders of those of us who are responsible for teacher training. We constantly chide teachers for teaching <u>about</u> writing rather than teaching students <u>how</u> to write. Yet we have been guilty of a similar crime; we publish reams of materials that <u>tell</u> teachers how to teach writing (most of it principles and theory) and neglect in these publications and in other ways to <u>show</u> teachers how to teach writing.

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We suffer from the naivete' of the dedicated professional educator -- the likes of which there is none other -- who is so involved with the trees that the forest blurs into obscurity. I am willing to accept whatever share of the guilt is mine (English Journal, April, 1970) and to try, in this rare second chance, to pose some explanations for the quagmire in which we find the teaching of composition; and as a means of seeking redemption, I shall suggest some practical teaching strategies to help us out of our current dilemma of knowing well what must be done but being unsure of exactly how to do it.

We accept universally the principle that a good writing program for any group of students maintains a relationship between writing and reality by having students write about what they know best -- by tapping current and evolving interests and by drawing topics from the students' real and vicarious experiences. The topics we select may well catch interest, but we make the fatal error of assuming that interest or motivation is sufficient to produce good writing. We make the further, more vital error of assuming that stimulation of interest allows us to begin with the highest level of abstraction -- the use of written language -- without damaging or completely destroying the student's sense of reality, of the concreteness of the ideas or experience he is to record. We have hit upon the mechanics of teaching writing without the injection of a natural, realistic approach to writing as an exposure of one's ideas to himself as well as to others.

The need to start first by helping the student to clarify the concrete experience he is to convey exists without regard to level of intelligence of maturity. The need for concreteness with the slow learner is well established; but, as a matter of fact, the need for concreteness probably is as great or greater for the intelligent student whose surface language facility allows him to get away with verbalizing, in a manner acceptable to the teacher, an idea or experience that has absolutely no meaning to himself on a concrete level. Thus the statement: "I write them but I don't get anything out of them."

How can this basic element of concreteness be injected into the teaching of composition? Let me first propose some basic guidelines and then try to illustrate them with descriptions of sample teaching materials and devices in illustrative lesson sequences.

I. A cardinal principle which overrides all others is that the writing experience must be carefully and naturally integrated into the total language teaching cycle.

We have reacted to the neglect of composition teaching by introducing the "one-theme-a-week" syndrome. Teachers harbor all sorts of guilt complexes if they don't have their students write one major theme a week; so the task if performed, often in such a perfunctory manner as to drive both teacher and class up the proverbial wall out of sheer frustration and boredom. It is quite possible that in the course of a three or four week teaching unit there will evolve naturally only one or two major compositions as an outgrowth of the reading or literature experience. The term "major composition" means just that; any developmental program presupposes prolific use of mini-writing exercises in which students practice and refine sub-skills and generally air ideas.

The following chart suggests some kinds of major compositions that might evolve from specific teaching units. Included in the chart are teaching concepts that naturally flow in the areas of prevision and revision. This chart also represents the kind of planning needed to develop a sequential program directly related to rather than isolated from the work for the semester or year.

TEACHING UNIT	MAJOR COMPOSITIONS(S)	TEACHING CONCEPTS		APPROX. NO. OF WEEKS
		PRE-VISION	REVISION	
That's What Happened to Me" (Reading and telling stories of personal experiences)	Simple narrative paragraph relating an experience (real or imaginary)	Controlling idea in topic sentence Selecting relevant detail	Sentence sense Use of basic structural patterns	3 - 4
sing Communications Media (Newspapers, Magazines, Radio, T.V., Films)	Simple expository paragraph Explaining or giving directions - - - - - - - - - - - - Two - or three - paragraph theme: Account of a school incident	Logical order Transitional words and phrases - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Accuracy in factual reporting	Use of prepositional phrases to show position, direction, time - - - - - - - - - - - - Use of appositives and other devices for adding meaning or explanation	4 - 5
Enjoying Short Stories" (Thematic Organization)	Simple descriptive paragraph: Describing a familiar scene	Observation of sensory detail Spatial arrangement	Accurate, discriminating use of simple modifiers Review: phrases as transitions	4
Around the World" or "People in Other Lands" actual and fictional stories of other lands and times	Writing a one paragraph summary - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Two - or three - paragraph report on a custom, place, name - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Making up an original story (optional)	Noting essential ideas - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Note taking Informal outlining - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Developing a story line	Use of compounds and subordination - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - To cut excess wordage and to show accurate relationships - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Review of word choice for description	4 - 6

I shall simply list the remaining five general guidelines without commenting upon them in depth, not only because you are more than likely familiar with them, but also because it is the intent of this presentation to focus upon demonstrating how these principles work in actual practice.

II. Sources for Writing

Much good writing is drawn from vicarious experiences gained through reading. Writing need not be directly about the stories; rather, ideas may be suggested by reading experiences. Although class reading should not be the only source, it will most likely be the primary source for younger students. Sources will widen as students' experiences accumulate.

III. Defining the Writing Task

The teacher must analyze carefully the writing task to assure a developmental approach with attention to clearly defined skills and sub-skills. In this way the complexity of the task can be reduced and elements basic to good writing can be taught.

IV. Sensory Reinforcement

Constant experiential, visual, and auditory reinforcement must be provided to keep the concrete experience or idea foremost in the student's consciousness. This facilitates accurate and intelligent choice of language to express reality.

V. Use of Models

Expecially in the developmental writing process, models are best chosen from reading material that is familiar to students. This familiarity provides a broader context in which students can more profitably analyze what is read.

VI. Concept Development and Manipulation

The development of concepts for a major composition must be slow and deliberate. Often a series of lessons in which students learn and develop "little bits at a time" will be necessary. In all cases, the movement should begin with the concrete experience or idea and progress toward the abstraction of language.

The basic guidelines just listed do lend themselves to practical illustration, not as well separately as in an organized lesson sequence. The lesson sequence which follows is drawn from a unit involving reading and study of short stories centered around the theme "Understanding Ourselves and Others". The entire sequence is devoted to a single major composition assignment: describing a familiar scene. A logical assessment of the writing task would reveal at least four sub-skills:

Summarizing a General Impression
Selecting significant details
Arranging details in logical order
Guiding the reader's eye (transitional words and phrases)

Illustrative Lesson Plans

for a

Developmental Writing Sequence

Grade: Eighth - Average Ability

Unit: "Understanding Ourselves and Others"
(Enjoying Short Stories)

Writing Task: Describing a Familiar Scene

First Lesson

Since the entire sequence is based upon student reading of a number of stories, this first lesson would be a transitional one to bridge the gap between the reading and the writing experience to follow. The lesson would follow at least one or two developmental lessons involving basic comprehension and interpretation of ideas in the story "Loss of a Hero" by Oliver La Farge (Gateway Anthology Who Am I?).

Objectives:

To appreciate the writer's skill in creating general impressions through description

To encourage observation of sensory detail

Materials:

Gateway Anthology: Who Am I? Pictures
Overhead Projector Transparencies

Procedures:

1. Recall Exercise: General Impressions (On Blackboard)
   Directions: Beside the number of each quotation from "Loss of a Hero" write the name of the character to whom the statement refers. Be prepared to defend your answers.

   a. ". . . the mixture of quick action, skill, and deadlines was characteristic."

   Pascual

   b. ". . . and he had the gift of being quietly forceful without apparent emphasis. The grand manner was his by nature." (p. 86, par. 1)

   Don Jose

c. ". . . riding at the head of what he allowed himself to think was his outfit. . . his excitement was heightened by the sense of command and responsibility." (p. 79, par. 1)

Pino

Discuss the exercise, having students give reasons for answers. Use textbooks as necessary to have students read orally the context to support answers.

2. Introducing the Concept Visually

. Show several mounted pictures of varying facial expressions. For each picture ask students to give one word that most aptly describes the apparent feeling of the person pictured (angry, unhappy, delighted). Ask students to point out specifics in each picture that led to their conclusion.

. Return to the first activity. Discuss why it was easy to pinpoint each character. Let them note that each quotation sums up the general impression of each character. Have students choose one word to complete each of these short sentences:

a. Young Pino was _____ (smart, impressionable)
b. Don Jose' was _____ (trustworthy, influential)
c. In his cleverness, Pascual was _____ (deadly, jealous)

Ask: How did the author of the story give you these impressions? Cite details remembered from the story. Suggest that we must check to prove our impressions.

. Practice Exercise: Divide the class quickly by seating pattern into three groups. Assign one character to each group and allow five minutes for skimming the story for as many details as possible for each of the above statements. Students are to write brief phrases and pages and paragraphs only.

a. Pino
p. 79, par. 1 (sixteen; excited by responsibility)
p. 83, par. 2 & 3 (thrilled by Pascual's actions; daydreamed about adventure)

b. Don Jose
p. 80, par. 1 & 2 (owned much property; able to hire Pascual)
p. 86, par. 1 (only man Pascual respected)

c. Pascual
p. 80, par. 1 (driving mules -- "threat and sting of lariat")
p. 85, par. 1 (whipped both Pino and horse)
p. 87, par. 1 (killed grouse with stone)
p. 89, par. 4 & 5 (killed dog by dragging him with car)

3. First Summary - Drawn from students

   . General impressions are formed by adding up details. The same is true for visual pictures or for word pictures.

4. Reinforcing the Concept

   . Ask: Why were we able to list more information about Pascual than about any other character? (Pascual's character is most fully developed because the author must show why Pascual became a hero in Pino's eyes and why he lost Pino's respect in the end.

   . Ask: If you were an impressionable boy like Pino, what about Pascual might appeal to you most? (probably his appearance)

   . Project on the overhead a transparency that shows only the outline of a cowboy on a horse. Then ask: How does the author make Pascual more than just an ordinary cowboy?

   . Have the class read silently on ditto sheet the description of Pascual in the two paragraphs from pages 81 (par. 3) and 82 (par. 2) and list briefly details about his appearance.

   . Check: Invite students to help transform the cowboy outline into a facsimile of Pascual by using colored pens to fill in detail as the paragraph is read orally.

   . Ask:

      a. What is your general impression of Pascual's appearance?

      b. In which sentence does the author sum up Pascual's appearance? What specific word does he use?
      (Underline somber in the last sentence of par. 1.)

      c. What kinds of details were selected to create this impression (Mark: specific nouns to name things; adjectives to show height, color; five details such as stitching)

      d. How did the writer's use of words resemble the work of an artist? Why were we able, within the limits of our talent, to draw a fairly accurate picture of Pascual? (The author drew the dark background in the first paragraph and then splashed on the contrasting color in the second paragraph.)

      e. In creating his picture, why didn't the author have Pascual speak? (He wanted us to concentrate on Pascual's unusual looks. Details were carefully selected.)

Summary

Review and have students re-state the major concepts in the lesson:

How general impressions are formed
Careful selection of supporting detail

Follow-up Activity (Time permitting)

Project via overhead two short paragraphs from "The Powerless Ones", an earlier selection by Yvette Patterson in the Who Am I? anthology. Have students identify the story, tell which character is talked about in each paragraph, state the general impression in each paragraph, and list supporting details.

Home Assignment

Select a simple but interesting picture in a magazine or in one of your textbooks. Write one sentence which sums up your impression of the picture and list supporting details in brief phrases. Bring the picture with you to class.

Second Lesson

Developmental Writing (Formulating topic sentences and selecting detail)

Objectives:

To encourage observation of sensory detail

To translate general impressions into effective topic sentences

Materials:

Small flannelboard
Magazine picture cutouts
Large magazine picture
Sample paragraphs on transparencies
Overhead projector

Procedures:

1. Drill and Recall (General Impression)

. Directions: Copy from the following list of sentences the one sentence that sums up all of the others.

a. The sink was full of dirty dishes.

b. After the boys finished cooking, the kitchen was a diaster area.

c. Pots and pans were piled on top of the stove and counter.

d. A cloud of smoke from burned cupcakes hung low from the ceiling.

2. Homework Check

   . Have volunteers show pictures chosen for last night's assignment. Comment on general impressions and supporting details.

3. Review: Observing sensory detail; Developing the topic sentence

   . Place the bare outlines of a room on the flannelboard. Ask: How can we describe the room? (Obviously we cannot. We can only name the topic: room. This is a room.)

   . Add, piece by piece, each set of cut-outs. (First set: This is a neat, attractive, or pretty room. Second set: This is a sloppy or junky room.)

   . How does the second group of sentences differ from the first sentence? (Name of the topic plus a statement or assertion equals topic sentence.)

4. Development (Noting sensory detail)

   . Review details that added up to topic sentences in the first activities.

   . Have students listen to a tape recorded description of a table setting (Chosen from the short story "The Dead" by James Joyce)

     Directions: Write the name of the topic and one word that sums up the general impression. Develop these two words into a topic sentence.

   . Listen again to the tape

     Directions: List as many details as you can.
     List colorful, vivid words.

5. Application (Student activity)

   . Select a familiar scene in the school: the gym during change of classes. Write one sentence that sums up your general impression. Then list in phrases the details that helped to form that impression. Remember: Name of topic plus an assertion equals topic sentence.

Review and Summary

. Have some sentences read aloud. Place them on the blackboard.
. Apply the topic sentence test to each sentence.
. Check lists of details for comment. Are they carefully selected?

the cafeteria at lunch time, the hallway during change of classes.

Home Assignment

. Pretend that you are about to lose your sight. Select and observe closely the one scene you would like most to remember. Write one sentence (topic sentence) that sums up your general impression. List supporting details in phrases.

- - - -

Third Lesson

Developmental Writing: Planning the Paragraph

Objectives

To develop the concept of physical point of view in description

To reinforce the concept of spatial arrangement to guide the reader's eye

Materials

Toy truck — Plastic figures

Toy cars — Overhead projector and transparencies

Procedures

1. Opening Activity

   For each set of ideas, write a summary sentence that could be a topic sentence.

A	B
untied, scuffed, run-over shoes	spotless white sink
hole in pants knee	bright, tiled walls
uncombed hair	gleaming pots and pans
shirttail hanging out	freshly painted ceiling
dirty face	fresh scrubbed, polished floor
torn, dirty cap set backwards on head	shiny, chrome trimmed stove
	sparkling dishes and glassware

   Write topic sentences on the blackboard and apply the topic sentence test.

2. Introducing the Concept of Point of View (Role-playing)

   - Place the toy truck, cars, and plastic figures on a table top. Ask students to pretend that they are looking at a street scene. Have volunteers assume roles of figures in various positions.

   - Arrange a collision and ask players to tell what happened. Hold each witness to a description of what he could see from his figure's position.

   - Discuss:

     a. How and why did each version differ.
     b. On what did each viewer's description depend? (Position or point of view)
     c. Suppose that someone could have been looking down from the window of a tall building. How would his description differ?
     d. Suppose that person above had a pair of binoculars. What advantage would he have? (Full view plus focus on specific details)

e. You are now the police officer who has just arrived on the scene. What details will you note?

Transition: Draw from pupils the fact that in the description of an accident, the fate of the people involved depends upon our accuracy. Point that when we describe something in our writing, accuracy and clearness depend upon our describing the scene as we see it from our physical point of view.

3. Development

. Project and examine two descriptive paragraphs from previous reading, using these guides:

a. What is the physical point of view in the paragraph? How can we tell?

b. How has the writer arranged his reconstruction of the scene? Does he move from left to right, top to bottom, or does he start in the center and build around it?

c. What words or phrases guide our eyes? Underscore them or use overlays in color to emphasize guide words.

Sample Paragraphs for Lesson III

A. (From "The Red Pony" by John Steinbeck)

Jody plodded up the hill toward the ridge top. When he reached the little cleft where the road came through, the afternoon wind struck him and blew up his hair and ruffled his shirt. He looked down on the little hills and ridges and then out at the huge green Salinas Valley. He could see the white town of Salinas far out in the flat, and the flash of its windows under the waning sun. Directly below him, in an oak tree, a crow congress had convened. The tree was black with crows all cawing at once.

B. (From "The Wind Blew East" by Jesse Stuart)

It was a big two-story house with a porch below and one above. The house was painted white and trimmed in green. Tall elms grew around the house, and the lawn was shaved as close as a man shaves his face. It was shaved closer than some men shave their faces. There were flowers blooming all over the yard, and small chairs

with striped backs were sitting under the elm shades. And near the big house was the big storehouse where everything was sold, from axes to sugar to liniment. Just above the storehouse, not more than a hundred yards, was the big brick schoolhouse where I would go to school.

4. Summary:

   . Based upon the preceding activities help students draw these conclusions:

      a. To be clear, a description generally should be made from a specific physical point of view.

      b. Details should be arranged in logical order so that the reader can "picture" the scene.

      c. Specific words and phrases should be used to guide the reader's eye. (List numerous examples.)

5. Application

   . Return to the opening activity. Ask students to rearrange lists in a logical order that would help the reader to "picture" the thing described. Then have them list words they might use to guide the reader.

   . From student suggestions, develop a single plan for a paragraph using one of the lists.

   . Cooperatively develop the plan into a paragraph. The teacher or a student recorder writes the paragraph on the blackboard or on a blank transparency.

   . Read the paragraph aloud to see if it conveys the picture.

Home Assignment

. Check the list of details you made last night for the scene you would like most to remember. Arrange the list in logical order and write a pencil draft of your descriptive paragraph. Use every other line on your paper. Bring in both the plan and the rough draft.

Fourth Lesson

Revising and Writing the Final Draft

Objectives

To encourage students' evaluation of their writing

To practice revision techniques

Materials

Students' rough drafts

Sample paragraph (teacher - written or student paragraph from another class)

Procedures

1. Ask students to close their eyes and try to visualize the scene as the sample paragraph is read to them. Discuss: Is the picture clear? Why or why not?

2. Project the sample on the overhead. Cooperatively evaluate and revise the paragraph.

3. Develop cooperatively and write on the blackboard a checklist for revision by drawing out ideas based upon previous lessons. It might look something like this:

Checklist for Revision

The Whole Paper

a. Can you "see" the picture being described?

b. What is the point of view of the writer?

c. Are the details arranged in a logical pattern?

d. Are descriptive words specific?

e. Are words and phrases used to guide the reader?

Mechanics

a. Are sentences clear and complete?

b. Is punctuation used to help the reader?

c. Are words spelled correctly?

4. Application

- Allow each student to select a partner. Partners will first read their papers to each other to try to "get the picture". Then they exchange papers. Using the checklist, each student evaluates his partner's paper and asks questions or makes suggestions to aid in revision.

- Partners return papers to owners who make final pencil revisions.

- The remainder of class time will be devoted to writing final copies in ink.

It would indeed be foolish of me to attempt to summarize this presentation in the usual manner -- by neatly tying the whole thing together in a tidy package by relisting those guidelines I have suggested or by parroting those of specialists in composition whose ideas most of you have read anyway. The presentation, I hope, speaks for itself. There are no simple ways to teach writing; it is hard, sometimes grueling work that requires careful, deliberate planning, even sometimes to the point of considering the most minute details and taking nothing for granted.

All young people, regardless of ability or maturity, need to manipulate ideas, to "see" them in some kind of concrete form, to break through to that reality expressed in the abstraction of language. If and when teachers of composition begin to face reality, experience, I think, will prove that what seems to be the longer, more circuitous route is in fact the most direct and effective. And the side effects may well surprise us. Consider the possibility that students just might begin to view English and English teachers as "for real" instead of "for the birds".

VPR/hn